

[William F. Holt]

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Pioneer [??] history

Range-lore

Nellie B. Cox

San Angelo, Texas.

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RANGE-LORE

William F. Holt was one of the earliest settlers at Ben Ficklin. He had many years of adventure before coming to the West. He says:

"I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1850 but do not remember any thing of my parents. I was passed around, it seems, among friends and kinfolks. I have never gone to school a day in my life but I have learned to read and write. When I was about ten, a family in Baltimore was going to send me to school and in return I was to wash dishes, look after the younger children and to be generally useful. C12 - Texas 2 I carried out my part very well, I hope, but I didn't get to go to school.

"Several years later I was living with some relatives. They sent me to look up their cow, an old, red cow. As I walked in the woods, I made up my mind to leave, which I did and I suppose they are still waiting for me to return with that cow.

"I made my way to an uncle in San Francisco, California, joining with a wagon train of settlers bound for that state. The Indians attacked us twice as we crossed the Plains. The

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first attack was during the day. The two scouts saw the band and we had time to form our wagons in a circle and fight the Indians off. It was only a small bunch of Indians, evidently some who had been on a hunting trip. They used bows and arrows and even as a young boy, I marveled at their skill. This attack was, I think, in Iowa and the Indians were of the Dakota tribe.

"I don't remember how many were in the wagon train, but when the wagons all got under way, it was to me an inspiring sight. The hardships of the journey were passed over lightly, really were never mentioned. To the men and boys, California was a land of gold and to the women it meant the establishing of homes away from what they considered a crowded East. Most of us larger boys walked every day and all day, but what was the difference? We were in no hurry. 3 "The Indians attacked our train at night the next time. They swooped down on us in a sudden attack just as we were retiring. Every thing was thrown into disorder for a short time but our men were always on the lookout, so it wasn't long before they were pouring lead into the red rascals. We didn't come out so easily that time. One of our young men was killed and two more wounded, but we repulsed the Indians. We fully expected another attack during the night and close watch was kept. Clouds arose and under cover of the darkness the Indians carried away their dead. They must have carried many arrows for there were lots of them left on the ground.

"The young man who was killed was shot in the abdomen. Even at this late day, the horror and terror of this occasion remain with me.

"We stayed in camp the next day and sorrowfully buried our dead and made the wounded as comfortable as possible. Then we proceeded on our journey.

"When I reached my uncle in San Francisco, I found that he was captain of a whaling boat and was ready to start on a voyage. He shipped me as cabin boy and I followed the sea for four years. I have been in every country in the world except parts of Europe. To me, Australia was the most wonderful country we found. On one island in the Pacific Ocean,

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the cannibals caught me 4 and were going to eat me. I know they had that intention. They felt of me, tested my flesh by pinching, and showed their pleasure in the fact that I was young and tender. They began to beat their drums to call the others to come and see their next meal but some of the sailors, hearing the drums, came to my rescue. On another occasion, I was very ill and my uncle left me on an island where the natives were friendly and I was nursed to health by the queen of the island. If these islands were named at that time, I did not learn any of the names. We went around Cape Horn several times and always in storms. On the ship the sailors cursed and swore and I did likewise but in port and at my uncle's home my aunt reprimanded me severely for my language and I vowed never to be guilty of foul words again and I have kept the vow all these years.

"The whales we caught were divided, the captain receiving one out of every three and the sailors getting the other two as their share. We were paid at the end of a voyage. As we were returning home after I had been on the sea for over four years, I decided to try something else so another sailor and I left the ship (and with it our profits from the whales) on the west coast of Mexico. We had only a little money and long pearl-handled knives but I made my way a-foot to Fort Concho, Texas. What became of my companion? He stayed drunk 5 so I was compelled to go off and leave him. The Mexicans were good to us and fed us but every where they wanted those knives that my companion and I had. We lay down to sleep one night and the next morning our knives were gone. Well, I was so glad to reach Fort Concho that I have stayed here.

"I married Miss Sallie Johnson. Her father furnished the soldiers in the fort with buffalo meat. I had gone to California for some sheep for the Stinson Ranch at the time of the Ben [Ficklin?] flood.

"I made several trips to California for sheep, trailing them back through the Imperial Valley, deserts, and mountains. In the spring of 1884, four men were driving a herd of horses north to some ranch, possibly the Goodnight Ranch. I was to come along and gather up

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the stragglers. The man told me the exact place they were to camp, on the edge of a small canyon in a mott of trees.

"I reached the place where they were to camp just before sun-down. Seeing the camp fire, I rode right in, only to be seized by Indians. They had killed and scalped the four men and were waiting for moonlight to round-up the horses. I had only a knife, the only weapon I have ever carried. By their motions and actions, I knew they thought there was something queer about me. They evidently expected a large bunch of men to follow 6 but when no others showed up they took me and the horses and started to the north.

"I have never reasoned out why they let me go, but after keeping me prisoner for two days and nights they untied me and gave me to understand that I was free. I eventually made my way back home.

"At one time in my travels, I think it was in Mexico, I came to a village where the people were dying of a plague. The dead were left as they had died and others who were able were leaving their sick and dead and fleeing. I stayed in an old church at night, as the dark caught me there. As I lay on the floor I could hear a peculiar, ghostly noise somewhere in the building. The noise seemed to come from the belfry. I never believed in ghosts but with the thought of those dead and dying people all around, I began to wonder if I hadn't been mistaken about ghosts. Finally, I got up courage enough to climb up into the belfry and there sat a big owl. He looked at me with his big eyes as if to say 'Man, do you see what I see?' At the first peep of light, I was gone from that place.

"I have served as Justice of Peace of the Knickerbocker district for more than 18 years. I was one of the first commissioners elected when [Fort?] Green was first organized as a county and have held court during hectic times. I organized the first Sunday School at Ben Ficklin 7 and also at Knickerbocker. The early days were not so bad as they are sometimes pictured." Range-lore

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

W. F. Holt, San Angelo, Texas, interviewed, January 13, 1938.